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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000885

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/20/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: UNEMPLOYMENT PROTEST MARRED BY CLASHES; 30
DEMONSTRATORS DETAINED THEN RELEASED

REF: A. MANAMA 871

[B.](#) MANAMA 812

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

[¶](#)11. (C) Police clashed with some 50 Bahrainis protesting the unemployment situation outside the Royal Court June 19. The scuffles broke out as police tried to keep the demonstrators away from an area near the Court entrance designated off-limits to protesters following a rally at the same location earlier this month. Police took about 30 of the demonstrators to the police station but, following the intervention of a senior Ministry of Interior official, they were released without charge. Five of the protesters went to the hospital, all in stable condition. Demonstration organizer and activist Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja suffered a chipped front tooth and bruised jaw. A parliamentarian close to the protesters admitted that their agenda is much broader than unemployment. We have heard reports for several weeks that Al Khawaja is seeking to get arrested in order to provoke a crisis that will force the King to intervene and deal with Al Khawaja's political demands. Despite a long history of doing so, the King appears to want to avoid handing down an outside-the-system solution in order to build and strengthen governmental institutions. End Summary.

Demonstrating in a No-Go Area

[¶](#)12. (C) About 50 Bahrainis representing the Committee for the Unemployed demonstrated outside the Royal Court June 19. This follows a previous three-day protest at the same location that ended on June 6 during which participants blocked access to the Court, particularly the Grievance Office, where ordinary citizens petition for assistance from the Royal Family in settling disputes. Following that gathering, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) issued instructions that demonstrators could hold their rallies only in specific areas close to the Court, but not in the way of regular business traffic (Ref B). MOI officials told RSO that the demonstrators formed up on the edge of the off-limits space and attempted to push through police lines to move closer to the Court. Other say the police tried to push the protesters away from the area. The situation quickly escalated.

[¶](#)13. (C) It is unclear which side, police or protesters, started the clashes, but riot police soon moved in and began beating demonstrators with batons. Some 30 participants were transported to the Riffa police station, where the scuffles continued. A senior MOI official reportedly spoke to the Riffa police chief and ordered him to calm the situation and release the demonstrators without charge. Several of the protesters, including Committee for the Unemployed organizer Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, who had been imprisoned then released in late 2004 for incitement and insulting the Royal Family, refused to leave the police station and demanded the public prosecutor come to take statements against the police. Representatives of the public prosecutor arrived and took the statements, and the remaining protesters finally departed the station.

Light Injuries on Both Sides

[¶](#)14. (C) According to press reports, four protesters were admitted into the hospital with injuries while a fifth was examined and discharged. All are in stable condition. Al Khawaja suffered a chipped front tooth and bruised jaw. The MOI told us that eight police were injured. The Ministry of Labor released a statement that, among the protesters, 29 hold steady jobs, five are students, and one is a business man. Only five are unemployed.

[¶](#)15. (C) Satellite channels Al Jazira and Al Arabiya filmed and broadcast the clashes. Pro-government daily Al Ayam in its front page editorial says "All indications show that the protest in front of the Royal Court was staged for the purposes of escalation but used the cause of the unemployed

to cover up a hidden agenda and hidden goals. This escalation has nothing to do with democracy." Moderate Shia parliamentarian Mohammed Al Shaikh, who represents a district close to where the demonstration took place and was involved in talks to secure the release of the protesters, told PolFSN that the demonstrators' agenda is much broader than unemployment, and focuses on greater political power and influence for Bahrain's Shia majority.

Frustration with Al Khawaja

16. (C) Minister of Industry and Commerce and confidant to the King Hassan Fakhro expressed his frustration with the situation to the Ambassador. He said the protesters, in particular Al Khawaja, are not serious about addressing the problem of unemployment, and want to attract attention. (Note: In the Bahraini context, complaints about unemployment often have a sectarian dimension. The majority Shia are disproportionately hurt by unemployment relative to the minority Sunni.) Fakhro said that Al Khawaja was trying to involve the King personally by holding the protest at the Royal Court rather than the Ministry of Labor.

Comment

17. (C) We have heard reports over the past several weeks that Al Khawaja wants to escalate tensions to provoke a crisis that precipitates the intervention of the King. He has reportedly been actively seeking to get arrested. Al Khawaja is using the unemployment issue as a lever to promote his broader political agenda, which at a minimum demands greater political rights for Shia and could range as far as advocating the departure of the Al Khalifa family and creation of a republic. (Note: The "hidden agenda" referred to in the Al Ayam article.) Al Khawaja has condemned and called for the ouster of Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa previously, and wants the Shia to hold the bulk of political power, particularly in the parliament. He likely believes that a political crisis that results in outside (read U.S. and British) pressure could cause King Hamad to step in and offer the Shia a concession in exchange for a pledge to participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections. Bahrain's Royal Family, like others in the Gulf, has a long history of intervening in the midst of an emergency and handing down an outside-the-system solution. The best example is when the King pardoned Al Khawaja after he was convicted of incitement and insulting the Royal Family in late 2004. While effective, this practice of intervention by the royals runs counter to the King's interest in building and strengthening governmental institutions (Ref A). As long as the government deals with the challenge from Al Khawaja with some finesse, the King is unlikely to become personally involved. Bahrain's leadership recognizes that Al Khawaja's arrest last fall actually heightened his popularity and notoriety, and that a second arrest might have a similar impact. At the same time, however, there is clearly some frustration in the high ranks of the government at Al Khawaja's continuing provocative activity.

MONROE